

Waking Up

An Honors Thesis (ACR 438)

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## Abstract

My thesis project is composed of a large charcoal and ink drawing and two large, glass sculptures depicting variations on the human form. In order to construct sculptures of this scale, I have combined multiple castings as well as pieces made with hot blow molds. This document describes my process of choosing a thesis subject, building the works to go into it, designing a message I wanted my work to send, and how I plan to move forward.

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### Project Abstract

My thesis project is composed of a large charcoal and ink drawing and two large, glass sculptures depicting variations on the human form. In order to construct sculptures of this scale, I have combined multiple castings as well as pieces made with hot blow molds.

The idea behind this body of work comes from my own goals for life. For my whole life, I've watched other people go through their days with mechanical repetition; endlessly repeating the same cycles. I've listened to the dissatisfied complaints of those whose lives are dominated by jobs that hold no interest for them. Each time I have this experience I wonder why these people continue going through the same cycle over and over again. I wonder why they don't leave their jobs and try to figure out a way to prosper by doing something they enjoy. I've come to the conclusion that it would be far better to go without many of the comforts and complications that come with such work in order to spend my days as I see fit. To continue a cycle which offers practically no benefit is to stagnate, and when we stagnate, we lose time, which we can never get back.

To represent this constant and active avoidance of stagnation, I often sculpt my figures in a struggle with the environment they exist in. Most recently, I've been thinking about this as a sort of pool of consciousness, with those lacking enough motivation to live their own lives trapped beneath the surface, and those strong enough to struggle for the life they want breaking through the surface, or even rising from the pool altogether. I've chosen the metaphor of a pool as the opponent for my figures because it is such a good representation of the real struggle. Avoiding the easy path of a steady career in exchange for time is dependent only upon a person's own determination. There is no opponent other than the self; no malicious force trying to keep the struggler in his circular life. A pool makes a good physical representation of this because it carries no ill will for the figure trying to break free of it. It is inanimate: a thing, like the easy choices in life, but like the easy choices it has a certain gravity to it and can even be comforting.

## Relevance

This body of work is more relevant in its relation to contemporary life than to contemporary art. The work developed from interacting with an overwhelming number of people who go through life as if their jobs or the seeking of a job were more important than the actual substance of life. Millions of us wake up in the morning to go work most of our waking hours doing jobs we dislike for people we've never met. We walk away from our work, taking our pay which is often barely more than enough to feed us and keep us housed, only to repeat the process again and again until we are able to retire, by which time most are too old to do many of the things they dreamed of doing when they were young. The work I'm presenting is relevant to contemporary life because it points out this flaw in the way we live.

Now more than at any other time, massive quantities of people occupy their limited time with work not at all related to their own lives. Millions work in call centers, doing nothing but selecting phone numbers and reading from a script all day. Millions more produce endless quantities of products that are, at best useless, and often even harmful to people. What will they have to tell their children and grandchildren? Don't do what I did? That's no way to live.

In a world where, as far as I know, we all only get one life I find it deeply disturbing that so many are willing to give up and accept living most of their lives doing things that bring them no happiness. I think pointing this out as wrong and unnatural is the most relevant and important message of this presentation. My generation of Americans are the children of people who grew up in an economically booming nation. That's no longer the case, and because of that, and the problems the nation's economic issues have caused their parents, I think many people my age have similar opinions about how life should be spent. We aren't willing to trust that our jobs will be there in a week or a month. We don't see the same stability in careers that our parents would have. My work adds to a growing conversation as a rejection of what is now the normal way of life. It urges the viewer to demand more from life. We only get one, so there is no reason not to be selfish with it.

## Inspirations

My inspirations for creating this body of work came from several places. First among these are the experiences I've had over the course of my life so far. Both of my parents work at jobs that are, at best, just a way to pay the bills. It's very rare that they come home with anything positive to say about their days. Naturally, after being around that almost every day for twenty-one years, I decided to do whatever I could to not be dependent on that type of career. This decision attracted me to certain authors who described the lives they led outside of society.

Among these was Henry David Thoreau. Reading *Walden*, I saw particular significance in the idea that living in a very conscious, independent way is a constant, ongoing effort. The person attempting it has to be extremely self-reliant and strong willed. This gave me the idea of creating figures shown in a struggle with their environment as a sort of self-portrait of the struggle I have with my ideals and the reality of the world.

These two things led to the development of the concept behind the work, but there are also some artists I've looked to for inspiration about how to address the physical appearance of the pieces.





Karen LaMonte

LaMonte's sculptures usually have an obvious seam line which she embraces as part of the piece rather than trying to hide. This element is important to me in designing my work because the kilns I will be using are of a size that will force me to divide my figures into sections.



### Rodin

Rodin's *Gates of Hell* gave me many good examples of figures interacting with their environments similarly to how I wanted mine to interact with theirs. A viewer looking at this can feel the tension in the figures and empathize with them.





"Pursuit"  
White trash bags  
Life-size 2007

Khalil Chistee

Chistee's plastic bag sculptures are very expressive on a psychological level because of how he handles the material and his use of gesture.

## Process

Like any artist or other person working creatively, the first stage of creation for me is simply a feeling. It is not quite emotion, and certainly not fully formed enough to be called an idea. The whole thing is very subtle, like a gentle pulling from some presence in the mind. When I feel this I start to analyze this feeling, and being a somewhat language-oriented person, I think about different linguistic ways of describing the feeling in my mind until I begin gathering a collection of descriptions that seem to fit. I often draw out what I call an idea map in the format of a web diagram; writing short descriptions and linking the best of them to each other to further flesh out the feeling. These bits and pieces become the foundation that the forming idea is built upon.

In the next stage of my creative process, I try to relate the jumble of words I've collected to things I've experienced. These experiences can come from anywhere: day-to-day life, books or articles, conversations, or even simply from some element of my personality which resonates with this forming idea. Finding something I'm more familiar with which relates strongly to this new idea gives me a good place to start from to begin constructing a design which embodies or conveys the idea.

The visualization process should be familiar to any artist. In this step, I consider what sorts of shapes, colors, textures, etc. will work best with my idea to form a cohesive whole that can stand on its own. To help me with this, I usually make sketches in which I can experiment with all of these elements without permanently changing a piece. These sketches are followed by mock-ups, the mock-ups are followed by some trial runs, and the experience of the trial runs helps guide me through making the final piece.

In terms of technique, I don't do much of anything that is so unique as to be noteworthy. I model my forms from water-based clay, I make molds of these forms which I can either cast or blow glass into, then I grind and polish the pieces to my desired aesthetic and apply any surface treatment I might want to use. For purposes of display and mounting, I am making short plinths tailored to my pieces.

### Comparison of Pieces

- Similarities:
  - Both *Sleepers* and *The Awake* focus on the same subject matter. In each, I have portrayed human figures struggling to rise from a pool of liquid, symbolizing their desire to gain more control over their own lives. The struggling figures in either work show a similar level of anonymity which I chose to use not to dehumanize them or make them seem lesser, but to give the viewer a blank on which he can project his own experiences. The final similarity is that both pieces have a dark quality to them. Each shows humans struggling to remain above water, fighting with their own weight and limitations, and that potentially mortal struggle lends a certain heaviness to the pieces.
- Differences:
  - The most obvious difference between my two pieces is that the *Sleepers* are glass sculptures, while *The Awake* is a drawing of a similar scene. This difference gives each piece some different qualities. For example, the *Sleepers* have a very tactile, heavy quality to them because they are both literally heavy cast glass and cast using very dense, dark colors. My figures in *The Awake* feel lighter by comparison. In the drawing, I chose to make the environment the darkest part of the piece. I wanted it to feel oppressive yet not quite hostile to the figures. The swamp threatening to engulf this group of people represents everything that makes leading a fulfilling life difficult for them. It is a cross-generational amalgam of our responsibilities, expectations, limitations, laziness, and lack of creativity. All of that mixes together to create a murky pool which muddles our vision and gives us no firm ground to stand on. In *The Awake*, I've also included a man standing nearly free of the swamp as a sort of psychological self-portrait of myself while I was creating this project. He is there to contemplate everyone struggling around him and try to find another way of living, but in doing so he appears indifferent to their suffering. I chose this presentation because as an artist I like to give people

a perspective that they aren't used to, but at the same time, I do not see it as my responsibility to reach out and help each individual live a more ideal life.

### Artist Statement

I've watched other people go through their days with mechanical repetition; endlessly repeating the same cycles with only occasional and insignificant details changing. I've listened to the dissatisfied complaints of those whose lives are dominated by jobs that hold little or no interest for them. This has made me wonder why these people subject themselves to this kind of life. In nearly every case, it is far from necessary. The only real thing compelling people to get up and go back to their unfulfilling task is a small measure of financial security. To me, such a slender reward has always seemed an inadequate exchange for such a large portion of a person's life. I've come to the conclusion that it would be far better to go without many of the comforts and complications that come with such work in order to spend my days as I see fit. I believe that an action only becomes fulfilling when the drive to perform it comes from the self. In this way, seeking fulfillment could be seen as a very selfish thing because reaching that point requires us to focus almost wholly on our own desires. Selfishness, however, is not as negative an aspect as we commonly think. For all any of us know, we only get one life to live, and in that context, pursuing only financial security seems like a very sad way to go live. I know people most often choose this path because it is easy or the most apparent choice, but the same ease of access often leads people to stagnate, and that before they know it, their complacency has allowed large portions of their lives to slip away.

The figures in my work represent this idea. They struggle with the space they occupy, unhappy in their environment, but most are not committed enough to making a change to succeed in their fight. The solitary figure who stands nearly free of the mire represents the thought process I went through to put this work together. He isn't completely free but is free enough to have time to contemplate the writhing figures in front of him. From here, he could either sink back into the mire or step away and forge a path all his own. Either path requires a choice and holds both positive and negative aspects.



## Dimensions

- *Sleepers*
  - Width: 30"
  - Depth: 24"
  - Height: 18"







- *The Awake*
  - *Length: 6'*
  - *Width: 4'*

### Moving Forward

Overall, the feedback I received from viewers of my show has been positive. People of my parent's generation were especially receptive to my message, often stating that their generation had definitely rushed into careers that were in demand rather than taking the time to think about what they would actually enjoy doing with their lives. As for my own generation, people have not been as vocal. I do not find this discouraging, however, as many of us have not yet begun to set out on actual career paths. Time will tell if my message has as much impact for us as it would have for our parents.

In the future, I would like to continue making work of this type that tries to speak to the audience about an issue I see as important. In order to make more physical work, I may use materials other than just glass, such as ceramic or wood, in the figures. Doing so would greatly speed up the production of each figure, and, therefore, allow me to make more work in a similar timeframe. My goal for this work is to make enough of it to fill rooms and be visually overwhelming.

### Bibliography

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